

## CHAPTER 1

### *Latin-American Women/ Women in Latin America*

Women were essential to the development of the new culture in the centuries that witnessed the conquest of Latin America. Emigration to the “New World,” however, was tightly controlled by the Spanish Crown and few Spanish women, particularly the unmarried, were granted permission to depart.<sup>1</sup> Isabel de Guevara’s 1556 letter to the Spanish queen, referring to an attempt to establish a settlement in the Rio de la Plata area of Argentina in 1536–7, describes the arduous nature such a journey required of women who emigrated to the New World:

So great was the famine that at the end of three months a thousand [men] perished. . . . The men became so weak that the poor women had to do all their work; they had to wash their clothes, and care for them when sick, cook the little food they had; stand sentinel, care for the watch-fires and prepare the cross-bows when the Indians attacked, and even fire the petronels; to give the alarm, crying out for all our strength, to drill and put the soldiers in good order, for at that time we women, as we did not require so much food, had not fallen into the same state of weakness as the men. Your Highness will understand that had it not been for the care and the solicitude that we had for them they would have all died.<sup>2</sup>

Since most of the settlers did not have their wives available either as sexual partners or as helpers in daily domestic chores, they began to mate with Indian women and to place them in their homes as concubines or unpaid servants.<sup>3</sup> Though nominally free and under royal protection, Indians generally enjoyed a status not much different from slavery. Women, in particular, suffered the indignities of being bought and sold like property, even rented to sailors making journeys to and from Peru. They were sexually assaulted by blacks and whites, and abducted by government officials and priests.<sup>4</sup> Used for heavy labor, Indian women were sepa-

rated from their villages and families for long periods of time. These enforced absences from their husbands and children destroyed family life and undermined Indian culture. Injuries suffered when they were forced to carry heavy loads for long distances resulted in complete physical breakdowns, resulting in a high rate of suicide (Sherman, 313–5). Indian women often acted as wet nurses for Spanish women who could not or did not wish to nurse their own children. In her novel *Balún Canán*, Rosario Castellanos describes the tragic contemporaneity of this colonial situation: an Indian woman's child dies because the mother has only enough milk to nurse her mistress's child.<sup>5</sup>

The lot of the black woman was more severe since imported African slaves did not enjoy even the nominal protection afforded the indigenous population. Much harsher treatment, including flogging for all kinds of offenses, was customary for both female and male slaves.<sup>6</sup> Sexual exploitation of female slaves was an everyday occurrence, and its effects were compounded when children were forcibly separated from their mothers to be sold (Williams, 302; Bush, 108–9).<sup>7</sup> The abolition of slavery brought the black woman little improvement in status: she continued to occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder, discriminated against because of her race, class, and sex.

Women's role in Latin-American warfare is beyond the scope of this introduction, but three brief references should suffice to illuminate the extent of their participation in Latin America's almost constant fascination with organized bloodshed. The first conflict, between Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay (the "Triple Alliance") on one side and Paraguay on the other, lasted from 1864–1870. The war commenced when Francisco Solano López, dictator of Paraguay, threatened to attack Brazil should that nation invade Uruguay.<sup>8</sup> When the invasion did occur, Solano López declared war, initiating a struggle that devastated Paraguay. A census taken in 1863 showed a total population of 1,337,489. Another, taken in 1871, recorded 221,079. Of that figure, only 28,746 were men (Akers, 195). This drastic shortage of men led to active participation by the Paraguayan women. Historical documents record the women's active involvement in the fighting during the final battle at Peribeby in August 1869 (Akers, 192). Lacking adequate arms, they used broken bottles as weapons, and in acts of extreme desperation, reportedly flung sand in the eyes of the enemy.<sup>9</sup> The massive loss of soldiers was compounded by the deaths of the women

pressed into service as porters. If unable to keep pace with the military forces because of illness or exhaustion, they simply “were left to die by the roadside” (Akers, 195). The battlefield death of General López ended the war, but the reconstruction of Paraguay entailed a slow process. With so few able-bodied men left to rebuild the nation, the women undertook the task.

They set to work to raise foodstuffs for themselves and their families, selling surplus to purchase the scanty clothing they needed . . . This action wrought a rapid alteration in the economic conditions. The women cultivated such crops as Indian corn, mandioca, and similar products to meet their own necessities. They made long journeys afoot to market, and where manual work on the farms was impossible they manufactured lace and other articles for disposal in Asunción (Akers, 200–1).

Scarcely sixty years later Paraguay was fighting again, this time against Bolivia in what is commonly called the Chaco War. The Paraguayans were victorious, but at the cost of another 30,000 soldiers. Bolivia fared worse, sacrificing 230,000 men (Fogelquist, 603). Once more, the women were an important factor, providing clothes, food, and weapons to the fighting forces (Fogelquist, 612). Paraguayan Josefina Plá, who lived through the Chaco War, is one of the women whose artistic efforts helped revitalize the country after it drained itself a second time of both human and material resources. Art, Plá reminded a devastated country, was not a mirror of reality but a beacon for the future: “Poetry,” she said, “begins where reality ends, its mission is to create new realities . . . to show what can still be actualized.”<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, well known is the account of the “mamitas” of Peru, which comes out of the war of independence from Spain. These women traveled with the army to cook for the soldiers and frequently tricked the royalists by entering a city while crying that the patriots had been defeated. At times they resorted to drastic measures, appearing nude and pretending to be insane so as to disconcert the royalist army and thereby give the patriots time to prepare their assault.<sup>11</sup>

Given these documented realities, why are Latin-American women systematically stereotyped as lovely, dependent decorations? The reasons are historical. Influenced by a Hispanic-Arab, Roman Catholic heritage, Latin America has perpetuated several received traditions that have effectively served to marginalize

women. One is the widespread and well-known cult of *machismo*, which glorifies the aggressive, sexually promiscuous male.<sup>12</sup> The second, equally powerful, cultural phenomenon is that of *marianismo* (Stevens, 91). Referring to the Virgin Mary, after whom the practice is named, *marianismo* glorifies the long-suffering, self-sacrificing female, pure and chaste, devoted to homemaking and motherhood. In her short story, "The Fall," the Uruguayan Armonía Somers exposes the oppressiveness inherent in the phenomenon of *marianismo*, and makes the Virgin Mary its first victim. In the story, the Virgin appeals to an oppressed human being, a black runaway slave, begging him to free her from her unnatural pedestal. Conventionally represented in an upright position, with her arms extended and her face frozen in a perpetual smile, the Virgin has, throughout the centuries, been dehumanized, transformed into a long-suffering and self-sacrificing being.<sup>13</sup> Only when represented as Our Lady of the Seven Dolors is she even allowed to cry over the death of her son. Nicaraguan Doris Tijerino explains how *marianismo* is translated into the daily life of Latin-American women: "The nuns told us that . . . woman's cross was marriage and she had to bear it."<sup>14</sup> Her father frequently asserted that a woman "is something that can be dominated, something he could do what he wanted with . . ." (Randall, 34). Domitila Barrios de Chungara comments: "We women were raised from the cradle with the idea that women were made only to cook and take care of the kids, that we are incapable of assuming important tasks . . ." (40). The notion that marriage and childbearing are woman's destiny is deeply rooted in Mediterranean culture generally and certainly in Spanish culture.<sup>15</sup> The Pauline tenet of man as the head of woman and Christ as the head of man has consistently supported and promoted both the image of women as mothers and homemakers and its corollary, that if a woman leaves her home she is to be considered "loose." This belief may provoke laughter, as in Rosario Castellanos's humorous parody in *The Eternal Feminine*, but it can still elicit severe criticism.<sup>16</sup> Victoria Ocampo, for example, was vilified for driving her own car on the streets of Buenos Aires in the 1920s. In rural areas of Latin America today, a young woman can still be denied the opportunity to work on coffee plantations for the same reason.<sup>17</sup>

Since women of all social classes were perceived as homemakers and mothers, little thought was given to providing formal education even to those of the upper classes.<sup>18</sup> This prejudice still pre-

vails among the poorer classes. Chungara tells of the Bolivian miners' contemptuous reaction when the *compañeras* formed the Housewives Committee: "The men weren't used to hearing a woman speak on the same platform as them. So they shouted: 'Go back home! Back to the kitchen! Back to the washing! Back to your housework!' And they jeered and booed them" (74). As a result, peasant women have great difficulty initiating change and are especially courageous when they do, as exemplified by the cases of Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, Bolivian Chungara, and Honduran Elvia Alvarado, who are among many included in this book.<sup>19</sup> So ingrained is the notion that they must be mothers that Latin-American women often internalize the need for large families. Abortion and birth control, disapproved of by the Roman Catholic Church, are generally unavailable. Women either suffer the effects of frequent pregnancies or resort to the horrors of illegal abortion and infanticide. In 1980, for example, 30 to 50 percent of all maternal deaths in Latin America resulted from botched, illegal abortions (Shapiro, 7). In the poorer classes, rearing of children is primarily the mother's responsibility and this problem is aggravated, as Honduran Elvia Alvarado points out, because many men refuse to give their wives enough money for food. The women are thus compelled to obtain outside employment, no matter how low-paying, while still being held responsible for the domestic chores of cooking, cleaning, and mending.<sup>20</sup> Since servants and nannies take care of household chores in the upper classes, class and not sex often determines the division of labor. Rosario Castellanos focuses on this issue in "Herlinda se va" ("Herlinda Leaves"), where she discusses women's exploitation of other women in this regard. Generally, however, there is no question that household chores are associated with women regardless of class. The Argentine author Marta Lynch recounts a conversation with a fellow professor:

One day we went to lunch together, and in the middle of the explanations which I was giving him concerning my work, I heard [him] asking me: "Do you know how to cook?" I believed that I was hearing things, but I wasn't; in effect, my colleague, in order to place me where he believed I belonged as a woman, *had to know if I knew how to cook. . . .*<sup>21</sup>

The novelist Silvina Bullrich further illustrates this attitude toward women:

It amuses me that when someone calls and asks me if I am busy, I respond, "I was writing." Ah, in that case, my caller thinks, I can continue speaking. It is a much stronger argument to say, "My toast is burning . . . I have something in the oven and have to take it out." The unavoidable immediacy of manual labor justifies feminine tasks. Her intellectual work makes her suspect.<sup>22</sup>

Some readers may object to the reactions of Lynch and of Bullrich as overly sensitive. After all, in Lynch's case, the very question precludes the assumption that all women know how to cook. In Bullrich's case, it is the urgency of the task rather than its gendered associations that affects the response. Whether such reactions are created as stereotypical in feminist writings or whether they indicate a subtle but real *machismo* that is ubiquitous, but cleverly disguised, women are reappropriating household metaphors to revalorize them for serious critical purposes. Rosario Castellanos employs this technique in "Lección de cocina" ("Cooking Lesson") in *Album de familia* (1971; *Family Album*). An excellent collection of feminist writings bears the title *El sartén por el mango: encuentro de escritoras latinoamericanas* (1985; *The Frying Pan by the Handle: Meeting of Latin-American Women Writers*). Debra Castillo's *Talking Back: Toward a Latin-American Feminist Literary Criticism* (1992) begins and ends with culinary and household metaphors. Cooking is the central trope of Laura Esquivel's best-selling book and even more successful movie, "Como agua para chocolate" ("Like Water For Chocolate").

The common perception that "men's work" is separate and different from "women's work" also contributes to the lack of economic opportunity for women. In some cases women are denied access to jobs because they are married, or, as with women worldwide, they are paid substantially less for the same work (Shapiro, 9–11). The flower industry and the coffee plantations provide graphic examples of the exploitation of Latin-American women. The workers in the flower industry are generally young women in their first job or those over thirty-five. They are regularly exposed to the chemicals used on the plants and they work under extreme conditions, either in the hot sun or in refrigerated rooms. Statistics show that over half these workers suffer from occupational maladies ranging from intense pain to chemical poisoning and muscular paralysis (León and Viveros, 9). The coffee plantations exploit both women and men. Rigoberta Menchú's



brother, to cite one instance, died of pesticide intoxication on the plantation where the family worked.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the birth of a girl is often perceived by parents as an event to be mourned rather than celebrated.<sup>24</sup> Sexual molestation of little girls by male relatives is not uncommon, nor are instances of financial exploitation.<sup>25</sup> Poor women “rent out” their small daughters to haul water. Rural youngsters are often lured from their villages and “sold” into prostitution (Randall, 107–8).

In a society where the natural condition of the male is to be aggressive and that of the female to be self-sacrificing, Latin-American women often see themselves primarily as nurturers. Despite extreme poverty, excessive childbearing, and abusive treatment by men, women find their lives worthwhile because they are mothers. Not too surprisingly, totalitarian governments use this deeply entrenched philosophy of *machismo* and *marianismo* to control women. For instance, feminist advances made in Chile during the Allende period were subsequently annulled by the military regime’s conscious campaign to “get the women back to the home.”<sup>26</sup> Interrogators of female prisoners in Guatemala, Argentina, and Bolivia commonly torture women by accusing them of failing as wives and mothers.<sup>27</sup> They are either called bad mothers or bad wives (Chungara, 27–28), or are made to feel so as they helplessly watch their children being tortured.<sup>28</sup> Chungara relates an instance in which Indian women were compelled to stomp on their children who had been forced by soldiers to lie on broken glass and pottery shards.<sup>29</sup> Rape, accompanied by the beating of female political prisoners, is a common feature of torture, which is done methodically and repeatedly by gangs of police or soldiers.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, *marianismo*’s “glorification” of chastity and motherhood is negatively reflected in daily life by the debasement of women as human beings. Bünster-Burotto states the case succinctly: “The combination of culturally defined moral debasement and physical battering is the demented scenario whereby the prisoner is to undergo a rapid metamorphosis from madonna—‘respectable woman and/or mother’—to whore” (298).<sup>31</sup> While the oppression of poorer classes of women is easy to document, subtler but no less flagrant forms of discrimination have been and continue to be practiced against middle- and upper-class women.<sup>32</sup> “For women of the ruling class,” Nicaraguan Doris Tijerino reminds us, “the choices keep you physically fed but mentally starved: [they are] the ‘success’ of a New York model work-

ing for charity as a social butterfly, [or] becoming the lover of a security agent . . ." (Randall, 7–8).

Despite the cultural bias, a strong feminism has been active in Latin America since the early nineteenth century. One of the first demands emerging from the feminist movement in Mexico, for example, was better educational opportunities for women.<sup>33</sup> Promises made as early as 1856, but not fulfilled until 1869, when the first secondary school for women was finally opened, clearly show how strong was the anti-feminine prejudice and, conversely, how determined the feminists were to achieve this goal (Macías, 9–10). Affluent families, of course, could always provide governesses for their daughters, and Victoria Ocampo and Teresa de la Parra are outstanding examples of the efficacy of this type of early education. Parra, who chose to remain single, used her successful first novel, *Ifigenia*, to expose the dilemma of her protagonist, an intelligent young woman whose sole destiny was to marry a "good" husband and to produce heirs for him. Ocampo devoted her entire life to fighting a society whose norms not only condemned her for receiving a male visitor into her parlor, but consequently forced her into an abusive marriage from which she had no recourse since divorce was illegal in Argentina.<sup>34</sup>

Whatever one thinks of Eva Duarte Perón's official politics and her single-minded goal to keep her husband in power, her campaign for women's rights won them the vote in 1947. She established the Feminist Party in Argentina in 1951 and persuaded her husband, Juan Perón, to name seven women to the Senate and another twenty-four as deputies. Because of her, the Argentine government turned a permissive eye on previously forbidden contraceptive use. The new Family Code of 1954 included the right to divorce for which Eva Perón had campaigned.<sup>35</sup> Yet this right was repealed shortly after her death (Hahner, 104). It has been argued that Eva Perón was able to benefit women only because she was married to a dictator. History, however, points to another conclusion. Juan Perón seems to have benefitted greatly from his wife's popularity among women, and his position was weakened considerably after her death in 1952. Many women participated in the massive procession in Corpus Christi to protest against him before his fall from power in 1955 (Morgan, 53). A succession of military dictatorships marked by the repression of human rights followed until 1974 when Juan Perón returned to power with his third wife, María Estela (Isabel). They were elected president and vice presi-



dent, respectively. When Perón died the following year, Isabel became the first Argentine woman head of state, and in 1975 she was re-elected president of the Peronist Party. When the country faced a 330 percent inflation rate and massive labor strikes, a military junta deposed and arrested her in March 1976, ultimately sending her into exile in Spain.

The coup that deposed Isabel Perón ushered in a new wave of terror in Latin America. In the next seven years over 15,000 Argentines were jailed or simply disappeared, and between 5,000 and 30,000 people “disappeared” in Chile in a single year. One out of every 500 Uruguayans suffered the same fate.<sup>36</sup> Women were to be one of the strongest forces that ultimately toppled the Argentine *junta* and restored democratic rule. As early as March 1977, fourteen Argentine women began to protest the “disappearance” of their children by walking around the pyramid in the Plaza de Mayo. Although they themselves were arrested, threatened, imprisoned and “disappeared” by security forces, 2,500 other women eventually joined them. These *madres* or “Crazy Mothers,” as they were called, are indicative of how the deeply entrenched philosophy of *marianismo* can be used both ways. By banding together to force the military regime to provide them with information on their missing children, the *madres* subverted the cultural system. According to the Sábato Commission, “the springboard for [the] mobilization of universal consciousness was the unsung, heroic achievement of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. . . .”<sup>37</sup> As mothers, they were excluded from the groups officially defined as “subversives” and their maternal status gave them “a freedom and a power not available to traditional political actors, especially if they were male” (Navarro, 257–8). Their form of protest, walking silently around the pyramid in the plaza, focused attention on the repressive nature of the Argentine military regime at a time when all political opposition had been banned. These mothers, in fact, were instrumental in the fall of the dictatorship in 1983 when they exposed the torture and the disappearances to the world. *Mothers and Shadows*, written by Argentine Marta Traba, is but one testimonial to the bravery displayed by the group that constituted the biggest threat to the military regime: the mothers.

Even though Latin-American women in general have not been as involved in official organized politics as their European and North American sisters, in countries such as Ecuador, women had

the vote as early as 1929, only nine years after women in the United States were finally enfranchised. Women have not participated in large numbers in the electoral process because in a society where education for women is not encouraged, many cannot pass the required literacy test (Harris, 5). On the other hand, Latin-American women have had powerful official positions. As early as 1524, Aldonza Manrique became the first female governor, ruling the Venezuelan island of Margarita for approximately sixty years (Morgan, 716). The Nobel Prize winner from Chile, Gabriela Mistral, was appointed consul to Brazil in 1939 and to the United States in 1946. Mexican Rosario Castellanos and Costa Rican Carmen Naranjo were appointed ambassadors to Israel. María Luisa Mendoza served as federal deputy for the state of Guanajuato, Mexico, and Chilean Marta Brunet served as vice consul to Argentina and later to Uruguay. Involving themselves less in corrupt political establishments, women have, rather, concentrated their activism outside the traditional political machine, taking part particularly in revolutionary struggles. Chungara records her crucial role in the history of the formation of the Housewives' Committee, which combatted the exploitation of Bolivian miners (71-9). Rigoberta Menchú and her entire family were in the revolutionary movement against Guatemala's totalitarian regime, which accounted for the near genocide of her people. Upper- and middle-class women joined their poorer sisters in the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua. Victoria Ocampo headed the Argentine Union of Women, founded in 1936 to forestall the repeal of rights won by women, including the right to their own paychecks.<sup>38</sup> Marta Traba, professor of art and first director of Colombia's Museum of Modern Art, risked deportation from Colombia for protesting the military invasion of the University of Bogotá in 1967.<sup>39</sup> Traba, who was too well known for the Colombian government to risk treating her as harshly as other dissidents, was ordered deported. The outcry against this decree was so great that it was rescinded, but Traba was subsequently forced to resign her university position and her directorship of the museum. So far as the government was concerned (although later her career demonstrated otherwise), she was "silenced" and returned to a woman's "natural" role of wife and mother. In 1982, Argentine feminists publicly denounced the Malvinas/Falklands conflict and issued a joint statement in solidarity with British feminists (Morgan, 54).

In the literary arena, women's voices have been equally prominent. Argentine authors like Griselda Gambaro, Luisa Valenzuela, Marta Traba, and Elvira Orphée repudiate military repression in their works. The surrealism of terror depicted by Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi; the development of young women into revolutionaries in the work of Colombian Albalucía Angel; the accounts of the oppressiveness of native Indian life in Mexico by Elena Garro and Rosario Castellanos; and the exposure of cruelty and of genocide by Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, Bolivian Domitila Barrios de Chungara, and Honduran Elvia Alvarado, all clearly show women's literary voices clamoring for justice and positive change in the political sphere of their respective countries.